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ABSTRACT

This article presents strategies that promote responsive instruction of young children with diverse abilities during teacher-directed large group times, specifically "circle time." It uses a traditional circle time format to show how such typical activities as observing the weather can be modified to provide multisensory, multilevel, and multiple learning opportunities. Suggestions are offered for including circle time experiences which utilize the visual, hearing, touch, smell, taste, vestibular, and proprioceptive senses. Teaching strategies for providing multilevel instruction include the use of auditory, visual, and tactile prompting; varying response options; and modifying duration. The provision of multiple opportunities to learn through circle time activities is considered within a model learning cycle. An example of these strategies to teach calendar skills is provided. (Contains 13 references.) (DB)

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THREE KEYS FOR SUCCESSFUL CIRCLE TIME: RESPONDING TO CHILDREN WITH DIVERSE ABILITIES

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THREE KEYS FOR SUCCESSFUL CIRCLE TIME:

RESPONDING TO CHILDREN WITH DIVERSE ABILITIES

Early childhood classrooms increasingly reflect the growing diversity in the world around us. Classes frequently include children with a wide range of abilities due to differences in experience and development. How are we, as professionals, to meet the needs of all these children?

Both early childhood and early intervention literature suggest that responsive teaching practices offer meaningful solutions to the challenge of diverse abilities in our classrooms (Beckman, Jackson & Rosenberg, 1986; Cavallaro, Haney & Cavello, 1993; Mahoney, Robinson & Powell, 1992). Responsive teaching practices are designed to "accommodate a broad range of children's individual differences in prior experience, maturation rates, styles of learning, needs and interests" (NAEYC, 1991, p. 30). Much has been written about the use of responsive teaching strategies during child-initiated times (Atwater, Carta, Schwartz & McConnell, 1994; Bailey & McWilliam, 1990; Jones & Warren, 1991). Information about strategies that promote responsive instruction during teacher-directed large group times is less prevalent. This article presents three keys for designing successful circle time—a prototypical teacher-directed, large group activity. These three keys are (1) **multisensory**

experiences, (2) **multilevel instruction,** and (3) **multiple opportunities to learn**. Strategies associated with these three keys will be presented to guide teachers in planning circle time events that accommodate children with differing abilities. As a point of reference, Figure 1 provides an overview of traditional events of circle time and their main purposes.

CIRCLE TIME EVENT	MAIN PURPOSE
Opening/Greeting	Consistent cue that circle time has begun. Welcome group.
Calendar	Awareness of the sequence of time and traditional time units. Remember past events and mark future events. Introduce the day's important activities.
Weather	Observe weather and its effects on children's lives and environment.
Classroom Helpers	Identify roles and responsibilities children have within the classroom.
Attendance	Welcome and acknowledge each individual child.
Discussion	Communicate ideas, knowledge, and interests around topics.
Sharing/Show and Tell	Communicate personal interests.
Songs/Fingerplays	Movement. Theme-related learning.
Closing	Consistent cue that circle time is finished. Transition to next activity.

Figure 1. Circle Time Events

KEY #1: MULTISENSORY EXPERIENCES

Teacher: Let's close our eyes. What do you hear?

Children: The rain.

Pamela: Rain splashing on the roof.

Teacher: Okay, who are my weather watchers today? Kim and Andres will you let us know how the weather feels today?
They open the door and stick their arms outside.

Kim: My arm's getting all wet.

Andres: The sky is yucky, mucky.

Teacher: Come back and show us your arms. Ooh, can we feel how wet they are? What should we put on our weather board today?

Children: The rain drops!!!
Kim and Andres find the rain symbols and put them on the board.

Teacher: Can we make the same sound the rain makes?

Lawrence: I can. Plop, plip, plop, plip.
Pats his hands on his legs, fast then slow.

Weather, like other events of circle time, often involves knowledge and skills that extend beyond a preschooler's comprehension. The example above demonstrates how the topic of weather can be presented at a level that is meaningful to all young children. The understanding of concepts such as weather and rain is developed within a multisensory context–that is, both the feel of rain and the sound that it makes. Young children learn about the world around them by exploring with their senses (Kostelnick, Soderman & Whiren, 1993). The younger a child is, the more he or she relies on sensory exploration in order for

learning to occur (Katz & Chard, 1989). To a child, objects are to be experienced—touched, tasted, rolled on, and smelled.

While educators often consider children's hearing and vision when planning circle events, promoting other senses, such as smell, touch, movement, and body position, may not be as carefully thought out. In classrooms that include children with specific sensory deficits, such as vision and hearing impairments or sensory-integration disorders, it is essential to provide multisensory support. Figure 2 lists a variety of ways to include multisensory experiences in circle time activities.

VISION	• A brightly decorated "surprise box" containing objects for discussions or other activities • Routine cards clearly illustrating the main events of the day
HEARING	• Vary teachers' voice–tone, volume, pitch, and pace • Audiotapes of actual situations in children's lives, e.g., cafeteria sounds, their families at home
TOUCH	• "Talking stick"–a special stick or wand for a child who is speaking to hold and pass on to others • Introduce and allow children to explore novel materials in large group before putting in the classroom for general use
SMELL	• Rub a drop of "imagination oil" (a scented oil) on children's foreheads before role playing • A smelling jar–an opaque container with a perforated top containing scented items (instead of "show and tell," try "smell and tell")
TASTE	• Cover children's eyes and have them taste familiar foods • Incorporate food into activities, e.g. give children a taste of peanut butter and jelly prior to singing "Peanut Butter and Jelly"
VESTIBULAR (Gravity and body movement)	• Combine large motor movements, such as jumping and rolling with songs • Provide adequate space for movement
PROPRIOCEPTIVE (Body position)	• Use tangible object , e.g., carpet square, sit-upon mats, to mark individual spaces for sitting • Accept a variety of listening positions, e.g., sitting with legs straight, lying on belly

Figure 2. Adding Multisensory Experiences to Circle Time Activities

KEY #2: MULTILEVEL INSTRUCTION

The second key for successful circle time is multilevel instruction. It requires that teachers monitor and adjust their instructional demands to match the ability levels of each student. Consider this scenario.

"It's Tuesday, sharing day. Who has something to share?" Susie raises her hand. She moves to the teacher's side with a doll in her arms. *"What do you have to share?"* Susie looks straight ahead, lips closed, body twisting back and forth nervously. *"Go ahead."* Susie looks down at the floor. *"Can't you remember? That's ok, don't worry. We'll let someone else have a turn."*

What's wrong here? Is it that Susie failed to respond appropriately to the task, or that the teacher failed to adapt the task to match Susie's level of functioning? Rather than asking Susie to sit down, the teacher might have tried alternative strategies such as offering a verbal cue, "What a beautiful doll," or requesting an action, "Show us how you take the doll's shoes off."

When implementing a multilevel approach to instruction, it is important to first identify the instructional objective of the activity. Ideally, an instructional objective is broad enough to address a wide range of ability levels. For instance, an objective for sharing time might be that the children communicate personal interests by describing an object or event. The teacher must then determine if adjustments or adaptations are necessary to ensure that individual children can successfully respond to the stated objective. This section discusses three

instructional alternatives that support multilevel instruction during large group activities.

1. **Prompting.** It is difficult for many young learners to engage in large group discussions. This is especially true for children exhibiting language-related problems such as processing verbal information, attending to a speaker, or formulating a response. The use of prompts, such as visual, auditory, or tactile cues, assists learners in understanding and responding to group discussions and instruction (Schloss, 1986). Examples of commonly used prompts appear in Figure 3 .

Category of Prompts	Examples
Auditory Prompts	Verbal cues Songs Musical instruments
Visual Prompts	Gestures or facial expressions Pictures/photographs of real items Rebus charts
Tactile Prompts	Concrete objects Adult proximity Touch

Figure 3. Useful Prompts for Circle Time

2. Varying Response Options. Teacher-generated questions, such as "What did you bring to share today?" are common openers for circle time discussions. Yet the ability of young children to respond to these questions varies greatly, ranging from an inability to respond in words to using multiword sentences.

Maximizing participation in circle time dialogue requires that teachers offer children a variety of ways to respond including, nonverbal and verbal options. Figure 4 delineates sample response options.

Nonverbal	**Teacher prompts with:**	**Child responds by:**
	"Point to ..." "Pick one ..."	• pointing
	"Show me how you ..."	• pantomime or imitation
	Signed question or statement	• signing
Verbal	**Teacher prompts with:**	**Child responds with:**
	"Is this a ball?	• Yes or No
	"What is this?"	• Single word
	"Tell me one thing you did ..."	• Simple sentence
	"What kinds of things can you do with this?	• Open comments and discussion

Figure 4. Sample Response Options

3. Modifying Duration. A fatal flaw of circle time often lies in planning activities that tax the attention span of children. While twenty minutes of circle time activities may be appropriate for a group of four-year-olds, teachers of two-year-olds find that five to ten minutes of active songs and fingerplays is a more reasonable expectation. Circle time activities can be altered in several ways to be more responsive to children's attention span.

1. Shorten length of circle for entire group.
2. Shorten length of circle for specific child by giving an alternative task, e.g., taking attendance to office or helping to set up the next activity.

3. Shorten length of activities included in circle, e.g., limiting the number of children sharing or asking each child to tell just one thing.

4. Offer children alternative ways to participate in order to reduce wait time, e.g., holding the sharing basket or choral responding.

KEY #3: MULTIPLE OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN

Teacher: Who remembers what we talked about in circle yesterday?

No one responds.

Teacher: Sandy can you tell the class what we talked about yesterday?

Sandy: Was it zoo animals?

Teacher: No, we talked about that two days ago.
You remember class, it was something very cold.

Students randomly call out:
Ice cream?
Ice cubes?
Frozen peas?
Snow?

Teacher: Right, we talked about snow!

Is this a particularly forgetful class? Expecting young children to retain knowledge after limited exposure to a concept is often unrealistic. Assimilation of information requires exposure over time—time for children to process, understand, and utilize knowledge (Katz & Chard, 1989). To make circle a meaningful learning experience, students must be given multiple opportunities to investigate key concepts and skills. This strategy of teaching concepts and

skills over time is especially important for children with developmental delays who often have gaps in knowledge or skills.

The cycle of learning (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992) offers a framework for considering the impact of multiple exposures to a topic over time. The cycle of learning has four phases: 1) awareness, 2) exploration, 3) inquiry, and 4) utilization. Awareness begins when contact with an object, event, concept, or person occurs promoting an interest in a subject. During the second and third phases, exploration and inquiry, the child constructs a personal understanding of the subject and then compares this understanding to reality and/or to the ideas of others. In the final phase, utilization, knowledge is generalized and applied to new situations. Awareness of this process enables the teacher to gauge the amount of time and the number of learning opportunities necessary for the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. Following are three strategies that promote multiple opportunities to learn.

1. Choose a few circle time events and teach them daily. The daily repetition of the same circle time events offers students multiple opportunities to learn the associated concepts and skills.
2. Repeat a single concept in a variety of ways throughout a week or over several weeks. Figure 5 illustrates circle time activities that support the concept "musical instruments" over the course of a week.

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Sing familiar songs while playing musical instruments.	Record and recall: Record children playing instruments separately and play it back.	Show and tell: Children share instruments from home or school.	Game: Play instrument behind a screen. Have children guess what it is.	Invite parents to share their instruments and musical talents.

Figure 5. Circle Time Activities Focused on One Concept.

3. Use a thematic approach. Plan one to three weeks of activities around a single theme. Use circle time, as well as other daily activities, to introduce and expand concepts and skills associated with the theme.

APPLYING THE THREE KEYS

Knowledge of the three keys: (1) **multisensory experiences,** (2) **multilevel instruction,** and (3) **multiple opportunities to learn**, help teachers develop instructional practices that respond to students with diverse abilities. The three keys offer a framework for determining strategies that support the "hard to engage" child during large group activities. The following example demonstrates how the three keys can be applied to calendar, a common circle time event. Due to its abstract nature, calendars present challenges to teachers attempting to keep students actively engaged. The approach to calendar, discussed in the box below, was successfully used in a model inclusive preschool program where children with and without disabilities participated in all instructional activities together (Abraham, Morris & Wald, 1993).

CALENDAR

[Photo of calendar to be inserted]

Multisensory: The primary focus of calendar discussions center on the daily symbol. The daily symbol, a multisensory symbol made from real items, collage materials, photographs, or clear drawings, represents a special event or activity. Each day this symbol is placed on the calendar to mark time in a concrete manner.

Multilevel instruction: Conventional time units that appear on a calendar, such as months and days of the week, hold little meaning for most preschoolers. The concepts of past and future are difficult for young children to grasp. However, children easily discuss events that are real and significant in their lives such as birthdays, special activities, or field trips. The daily symbol serves as a concrete, visual prompt to help children distinguish one day from another. Numbers, days of the week and months, which are more abstract, appear on the calendar and offer alternative points of discussion depending on the readiness of individual children.

Multiple opportunities to learn: Presenting calendar on a daily basis allows children to have multiple opportunities to see the calendar as a method for marking time. Symbols for birthdays and other special events are placed on the calendar at the beginning of each month allowing children to anticipate future events. Children review the symbols at the end of each week, recalling themes or favorite activities. At the close of each month, children select their favorite symbol and describe its significance. This enables children to see the month in its entirety as well as recall the individual events. These highly prized symbols are taken home, giving children the opportunity to discuss significant events of the past month with their families.

* * * * *

The three keys for successful circle time: (1) **multisensory experience,** (2) **multilevel instruction,** and (3) **multiple opportunities to learn,** offer teachers of young children a framework for developing strategies that address

the diverse needs in their classrooms. The strategies included in this article represent the tip of the iceberg, serving as a beginning point for further exploration of responsive teaching practices.

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